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SUBJECT: IEC/ECC AGREE ON SAMPLING METHOD FOR AUDIT
PROCESS, CANDIDATE REACTION MIXED

REF: KABUL 2789

¶1. (SBU) Summary. The Independent Elections Commission (IEC), the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC), the UN and international experts have finalized an audit process for contested presidential election ballots. SRSG Eide introduced the new methodology to candidates' agents and election observers on September 24, with a sharp reaction by Abdullah's campaign manager to perceived IEC bias. The Embassy has pushed for candidates to be better informed and will continue to work with the UN, IEC and ECC on educating the candidates and the public regarding this complex endgame.
End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) As of late September 23, the IEC and ECC had agreed on a way forward to fulfill the requirements of the September 8 ECC audit/recount directive (ref A). The IEC and ECC have opted for an audit process rather than a full recount of ballots, which would have been too time-consuming. The audit will draw a sample of 313 ballot boxes from among the 3063 polling stations that fall under the criteria of the ECC directive. The audit methodology follows international best practices and was designed by UN electoral experts.

¶3. (SBU) On the afternoon of September 24, UN SRSG Kai Eide hosted a meeting at which top IEC and ECC officials briefed national and international observers, and candidate agents representing the top four candidates, on the methodology. IEC President Ludin, IEC Chief Electoral Officer Najafi, and the ECC Commissioners participated. When Eide left the room, according to UNDP-ELECT sources, the discussion grew heated, with Abdullah campaign manager Satar Murat doubting Ludin's impartiality and integrity, and Ludin referring to Abdullah as "the loser." Under SRSG Eide's supervision, the meeting returned to calm. The meeting did accomplish one of its other goals - the random picking of sample boxes from different provinces to be audited - allowing the next stage of the process to begin.

Methodology

¶4. (SBU) The IEC/ECC identified three categories of suspect ballot boxes: 914 polling stations with over 600 ballots and where one candidate received 95 percent of the votes; 627 polling stations with over 600 ballots but no candidate receiving over 95 percent; and 1522 stations with between 100 and 600 ballots where one candidate received over 95 percent of the vote. These three "universes" will have about ten percent of their polling stations audited for a total of 313 polling stations under audit. The stations to be audited are randomly selected from each universe. If 20 percent of polling stations from a sample (i.e., 20 percent of the 10 percent sample) are found to be fraudulent, the entire "universe" will be nullified.

¶5. (SBU) The operational plan to conduct the audit begins with retrieval of the boxes by three groups with teams of four persons observing the chain of custody. Air transport,

possibly via the UN and ISAF, will move boxes from provincial capitals to the IEC headquarters in Kabul for the actual audit. The process will separate from the audit those boxes or ballots also subject to the ECC complaints process. The audit will proceed once observers and candidate agents are trained (probably September 27). Experts from UNAMA and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) will formulate standard operating procedures (SOPs), checklists, and a policy paper - to be based on international standards - for the ECC. Two international experts, the UN's Carlos Valenzuela and IFES' Carina Perelli, will sign as witnesses to the documents that detail the SOPs and the policy.

Candidates Need Some Convincing

¶6. (SBU) SRSG Eide told us that he briefed both Karzai and Abdullah individually on September 24, and that both asked questions about criteria but, according to Eide, expressed "satisfaction" with the audit plan. Both candidates are publicly on the record supporting the IEC/ECC process, although they have not yet made statements on the specific new methodology.

¶7. (SBU) However, some members of both the Abdullah and Karzai teams are expressing concerns about specific procedural steps: the Karzai team on the recount, and the Abdullah campaign on sampling. A Karzai advisor confirmed to us the accuracy of a September 23 Tolo TV report that President Karzai opposed a recount of votes in some polling sites, because such a plan would "disrespect the nation's

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vote." The Tolo broadcast reported correctly that Karzai's team did agree with the decision to investigate the votes of polling sites where more than 600 votes had been cast.

¶8. (SBU) One Abdullah campaign advisor told us that in principle, the Abdullah team supported the new joint IEC/ECC efforts to investigate fraud, and was upbeat about the September 24 announcement. However, two other Abdullah advisors separately voiced concerns about anything less than a full recount; international affairs advisor Farid Zikria said to us that "just taking samples" was not enough and that doing so was a "political decision" and a "change of direction" for the ECC, which they had counted on to "rescue the election". He claimed that unless at least 600,000 of the 1,200,000 suspicious votes were nullified -- which would lead to a second round -- the election result would not be legitimate.

Messaging

¶9. (SBU) UNDP-ELECT will hold a broad meeting of stakeholders September 25 to discuss messaging, and an IFES public relations expert will arrive in Afghanistan shortly to augment the IEC/ECC effort. Post had been active in getting candidate agents invited to the September 24 rollout and will continue to push for more proactive information-sharing, explanation, and transparency from the IEC/ECC. These have been in short supply at times, which has contributed to an atmosphere of a lack of trust in the process. IEC, ECC and the UN's approach to explaining this complex endgame is key to its ultimate success and credibility.

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